DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 256 562 SE 045 454

AUTHOR Steedman, Philip
TITLE Art and the Ideology of Scientism.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (69th, Chicago, IL, March 31-April 4, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Art; Comprehension; *Philosophy; Science History; *Sciences; Scientific Enterprise; Technology; Theories
IDENTIFIERS *Ideology

ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with two pervasive and apparently reliable theories, namely, those general accounts of the status of science and art which seem to form part of the "bedrock" of contemporary thinking. The first section discusses what are taken to be the most commonly accepted and highly legitimized general accounts of both science and art, asserting that the common understanding of science is an "ideology of scientism" and that the common understanding of art is an "ideology of the aesthetic." The second section examines some serious problems with the accounts of science and art described in the first section, suggesting that they be rejected (while being cautious and tentative about any new notions which might replace them at the present time). The last section (conclusion) points out that the ideology of scientism gives a false status to the nature of science and turns it into a religion while the ideology of the aesthetic trivializes art by making it little more than the instrument of culture's growing narcissism. Issues related to how a technological society can produce these misunderstandings of the nature of knowledge in science and art are also addressed. (JN)

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ART AND THE IDEOLOGY OF SCIENTISM

Philip Steedman
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary French philosopher Michel Foucault has recently pointed to

> "...what has emerged in the course of the last ten or fifteen years is a sense of the increasing vulnerability to criticism of things, institutions, practices, discourses. A certain fragility has been discovered in the very bedrock of existance -- even, and perhaps above all, in those aspects of it that are most familiar, most solid ... (related to this) one in fact also discovers something that perhaps was not initially forseen, something one might describe as precisely the inhibiting effect of global, totalitarian theories."[1]

This paper is concerned with two of our most pervasive and apparently reliable theories, those general accounts of the status of science and art which seem to form part, indeed a very large part, of the "bedrock" of contemporary thinking. In the first section an outline will be presented of what I take to be the most commonly accepted and highly legitimized general accounts of both science and art. No apology is offered for the sketchy nature of this treatment. The reason why what is offered here must take the form that it does is twofold. First, I do not want to lose sight of the central issues discussed here. Second, a fully adequate treatment of these topics would extend to many volumes. In the second section I will mention some serious problems with the accounts of science

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and art presented in the first. To the extent to which one takes those problems seriously one must, I think, reject the general accounts offered in the first section. A conclusion will follow. But "conclusion" is perhaps too strong, for part of the point of my argument is that we cannot make what is conventionally thought of as a conclusion about these matters at this time. We are forced to reject our previous notions and are enjoined to be cautious and tentative about any new notions with which we might replace them at this time.

I. The Conventional Accounts of Science and Art

Though the most recent form of understanding in our culture, science is generally seen as the most successful. This is the Age of Science and that is not only because the technological applications of scientific knowledge have transformed our lives but also because science is identified with Truth. There are at least three reasons for this, each closely identified with the others. They form the "bedrock" of the self understanding of science and of its public evaluation.-
First is the notion that scientific knowledge is cumulative. Unlike knowledge in other forms[2] science does not simply discard the old in order to replace it with the new. Rather it builds on the old, theories succeed each other in a magnificent sweep of the progressive. So, at any given time a particular bit of knowledge, or even a major theory, can be found wanting (and refined) or even false (and discarded) but there is no waste.

The great enterprise of science uses both its successes and its apparent failures to good advantage.

It can do so because of the second notion. That is that science has a method. Scientific knowledge is unlike other forms of knowledge because it is created in a particular way. Literary critics, historians and the like might wade in their shallows but the scientists can swim upon the sea of real knowledge certain of a special methodological guarantee. And not only is this method unlike others, it is also self-correcting. Just as the knowledge the scientist produces is endlessly self-adjusting (to "the facts") so is scientific method self-correcting. The key here is experimentation. The experiment ties theories to the world in such a way as to ensure both the self-correcting progress of knowledge and the progressive refinement of the tools of investigation. All this directs our attention to the third notion about science. It is that scientific knowledge is objective. The scientist as scientist does not let feelings, emotions, political or moral convictions and the like enter into the production of knowledge; science is value-free. Those literary critics and historians are endlessly caught up in the discourse of human experience whereas science (and here I mean physics and those other sciences which seek to approximate it methodologically and epistemologically) stands beyond human life, outside our time and free of our concerns. Its language is that of mathematics, its truths are those of nature itself. Herein lies the origin of the great optimism which has surrounded science since the time of Galileo. For it has seemed, until

quite recently, that science did really promise a brighter future. A "rational" world might come to replace the dogmatic culture of religion which had held us in its grip until science released us. If things have not turned out quite as well as expected it must be in no small part because this understanding of science is flawed, fatally so.

But so too, I want to say, is our understanding of art. Here I do not have anything especially prescriptive in mind by "art" either. The person-on-the-street or "Dan Rather and the CBS Evening News" sort of definition is what I am talking about. The contents of most "Introductory Western Civilization 100" textboks will do quite well. So I am including the Greek dramatists, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Proust, and the like in literature. Certainly composers like J. S. Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner and Schoenberg would count in music. And in the visual arts there is an embarrassment of riches: Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt, Cezanne, Van Goth, Picasso, the list goes on and on. To it we should also add whole other lists like those of the great architects, potters, weavers and sculptors. There is a gray area, of course. It is occupied by photorealists and the like. Andy Warhol might well represent those people. They are ambiguous; arguments can be mounted from either side for their inclusion as "artists" or not. There does not, however, seem to be much doubt, at least in my mind, about where those who submerge themselves in water, attack and mutilate themselves with sharp instruments or dig a whole in a desert then fill it in fit. That will not count as "art." Why not? The

explanation I want to offer is related to what has been said earlier about science. For I want to assert that the common understanding of science outlined earlier is an ideology of scientism. As such it serves a number of functions. The most important is to obscure the real nature of science from us. But I will return to that point. Another is to delegitimize other types of knowledge. The (much misunderstood) norms of rationality within science itself thus become the norms of rationality. Knowledge which is not science is judge "irrational," or at best "less significant." This has happened in the case of artistic knowledge. So yes, I do want to claim that art does produce knowledge. If this seems counterintuitive then it is worth remembering that for almost all of the history of this culture, from the pre-Socratics, it would not have seemed so. That it does, or even might, is the result of the action of another of those "totalitarian theories" Foucault mentions. It is part of our common sense understanding of the social world and of the place of art within it. It is our ideology of the aesthetic and it runs as follows. Art works, or "products," or "objects" are essentially at once psychological and private. This is true both in respect of their creation and their consumption. They may be used to ends which are not psychological and private but this is to vulgarize them. In essence they are expressions of the subjective state of their creators and are to be consumed in that way, too. "Consumed" here is seen as vulgar, too; art is to be appreciated. We stand

in relation to works of art as potential connoisseurs. Our interactions with such objects should, ideally, produce an "aesthetic experience." And this is an experience essentilly unlike any other we might have. On this general view of things the content of the objects is either not especially important or cannot be given a reliable analysis. Rather the formal properties of art works are discussed. We can at least communicate about form intelligibly, whereas content, being more psychological, is difficult or even impossible to say much about. This view of our interactions with art works cuts out social and historical contexts. The individual confronts the work. An interrogation of the work produces an aesthetic experience. The individual is altered in some respect, usually "enriched." And this is all that can really be said abut the matter.

On behalf of this general account of things a very big claim is made. It is that the discovery of the "aesthetic experience" has released art from its role as the servant of other pursuits and has given it an autonomous status of its own. I think this is, to at least a great extent, how things are now often seen. But I interpret and evaluate all this rather differently. For by "elevating" art to the realm of "the aesthetic," and simultaneously decontexturalizing it from other social concerns, it has become trivialized. Yes, art may have a status of its own, on this account, but it is also an optional extra in life, a frill. "You like Rembrandt, I like the NFL" and since the whole business rests on private, psychological "likes" there is not much more to say about the matter.

II. Confronting the Conventional

No significant field of knowledge has been more open to that "increasing vulnerability to criticism" than that of the status of science during the period Foucault referred to. It is not just that certain details of the sketch of science I have presented have been criticized but rather that the whole substance of it has come under the most radical revision. Individuals evaluate the persuasiveness of these criticisms differently and their implications are, of course, debated but there can be no doubt at all that the central core of our understanding of science now must be reevaluated. Let me show you what I mean.

The claim that science develops by accumulation has come under both logical and historical attack. Were science to do so, the problem of induction would have to have been solved. Karl Popper's attempt to do this,[3] though perhaps the most cunning ploy since Hume defined the problem, is generally judged to be a failure. But more than this, a rival account of scientific development, one that is built from the very notion of discontinuity, has been advanced by a number of philosophers and historians. Thomas Kuhn has argued that science passes through discontinuous periods or paradigms and that what "truth" and "the facts" are at any time is paradigm specific.[4] Paradigms are divided by periods of "revolution" when processes of "conversion" cause scientists to switch from seeing things in one way to seeing them in another. And worse (for the convential account) even than this, we have no way to stand back from different paradigms and evaluate them. In other words there is no

"neutral" position from which to appraise rival paradigms, we cannot escape our own thinking and adopt "nature's own point of view."

Wedded to this logical insight is an historical one. Close examination of the historical record demonstrates that those historians who have written the canons of accumulationism have been writing the history of a fantasy. People did not abandon Ptolemy for Copernicus and Galileo because of "the evidence" any more than did Einstein begin work in relativity theory because the Michelson had convinced him to abandon Newton. Accumulationism is a logical impossibility and an historical fantasy. The objectivity of science fares little better under critical scrutiny. If there is no fully rational way to switch from one paradigm to another, nor even to evaluate such switches after they have taken place, then what is to be said about our fundamental commitments to any particular paradigm? In order to see how such switches or conversions are made we need to look beyond science itself. And this is a dangerous thing to do, for it calls into question another of the most basic tenets of the ideology of scientism I have identified. Basic to the conventional understanding of science is the notion that it has a life of its own; that its affairs are not those of economics, politics, ethics and the like, but rather that it has its own "internal history" based on its own "logic." But, as a matter of fact, this is not the case. No worthwhile description of the history of science can succeed without reference to the social, economic and political contexts in which it has developed. It is just these contexts which provide the grounds for paradigm

switches. So what we can say about any particular switch is something like this: given that you are committed to principles a or b (perhaps the maintenance of the peace of mind of the faithful or the technical control of nature) you would be well advised to support paradigm a' or b' (perhaps Ptolemaic celestrial mechanics or that of Galileo). The point is that science itself cannot make such a choice for us and choices, whatever they may be, can only be evaluated as to their rationality within contexts beyond that of science.

It will probably come as no surprise to you that I have little that is good to say about the idea that science has a distinctive or unique methodology, one which gives its products a special status. Paul Feyerabend, for example, has shown in both historical and philosopical studies[5] that scientists use <u>any</u> methods that work. And "work" here gets redefined as the enterprise goes along. There is no "magic key" to the universe, no tried and true mechanical methodology. Indeed, just the reverse is true. Scientists muddle along like the rest of us with guesswork, hunches, suppressed "failures" and a lot of very hard work. But why shouldn't there be a "method"? Just because science is so discontinuous and disorderly, because its problems and questions change, because, above all else, it is a human enterprise. The idea of "a method" may be (superficially) attractive but it is an illusion, the sort of idea we invent to comfort ourselves.[6]

My evaluation of this ideology of scientism is, predictably, a rather stern one. To the extend to which I have identified a real and basic unerstanding of science which has

widespread currency (and not merely a caricature) then we need, as a society, to think again about our commitment to what is, I think, a new religion. Ironically, this is not a situation in which we need the courage to say "look! the Emperor (science) has no clothes" but rather to admit that the Emperor is rather differently attired than we had thought. Science is a much more interesting enterprise than the ideology of scientism would suggest. It is also more exciting, and for reasons just like those I mentioned earlier.

Just as radical a change is needed in our understanding of art. I think the private, psychological "aesthetic experience" account of things is just as much a totalitarian theory as was the ideology of scientism. It is time that I laid my cards on the table in respect of art. Notice that I have been using "art" throughout rather than "the arts" which is, these days, more normal. There is a reason for this: it is that I all think art is unified by a basic concern with morality. Now that is not to exclude many other of its concerns. Art objects, like just about any objects, can be interpreted in many ways. They do have psychological dimensions but then so do other things, including scientific theories. They can give rise to especially intense experiences. But again so can all manner of other things. As for "aesthetic experience" I must confess to not being able to find out just what that is supposed to mean. My friends tell me that, as an ex-music critic, I used to make my living from them. That may be true, but so far as I can see "aesthetic experience" is certainly not a very useful idea. Art, properly

understood, presents us with the means to make moral interpretations. I am assuming here that moral questions are basic in human life and that we approach them in different ways. Art provides one of the most potent of these ways. There are certain morally significant facts about life, like, for example, the fact that we are mortal, we will die. Left on its own such facts are meaningless, they require interpretation. We make sense of them in various ways; art is one of these, indeed it is one of the most important. Art provides machinery to think with about our most fundamental concerns. The very greatest works of art become paradigms of such thinking. The deaths of Antigone, Dido, Cordelia, Siegmund and, more recently, Benjamin Britten's Peter Grimes and Patrick White's Mordacia Himmelfarb are the very matter by which the social world understands itself. We see in them, in abstracted and symbolic form, elements of our own experience. But more, they help us, by continuously interpreting that experience, to create and recreate ourselves as moral beings. It is not as if the proper metaphor here is that of the mirror, we do not simply see ourselves in art. Rather, art provides a sort of x-ray of our experience. This is part of what Kenneth Clark meant when he quoted Ruskin as follows:

> "Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts, the book of their deeds, the book of their words and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others, but of the three the only trustworthy one is the last."[7]

III. Not a Conclusion

It would seem to be quite easy to complete this paper as follows. I might say something like: we have two totalitarian theories, ideologies of scientism and the aesthetic. The first gives a false status to the nature of science and turns it into a religion for us. The second trivilises art by making it little more than the instrument of our culture's growing narcissism.[8] Clearly, armed with this sort of critique, we should attempt to knock science off its perch and elevate the evaluation of art to something more appropriate given its real moral nature and potential social importance. The trouble with such a conclusion is that one wants to know how it might be done. In order to answer that question we need for a start to look carefully at how things came to be as they are. This could be legitimately attempted in a number of different ways. My way is to ask "what sort of a society would produce these misunderstandings of the nature of knowledge in science and art?" Asked in that particular way a very illuminating answer is resonably clear: a technological society.

Technological society needs to delegitimize certain modes of discourse and legitimize others. One might say that it needs its own religion and has found it in a positivistic understanding of science. For science, so conceived, is the ideal articulation of our estrangement from nature. Nature is, by this account, a passive realm which we may simply control. The earlier Greek notion of nature and our part in it as a set of organic, meaningful relationships has been quite overwhelmed by, and

replaced with, that of positivist science. Co-extensive with this has been the delegitimizing of the moral discourse which was part of an earlier picture of such things.[9] It is as if in a technological society there are certain sorts of questions which really cannot be asked. 'Does it work?' or 'Is it efficient?' makes sense in our world, whereas 'Is it good or just? does not quite.[10] The scientising of psychology has increasingly taken ethics out of the consideration of human life as well. Not only is nature seen as something to be manipulated, so to an increasing extend, are we ourselves. Technological society demands that human beings themselves be seen as machines, or, at the least, as machinelike. Psychological-technical discourse has increasingly replaced moral discourse in the consideration of human affairs. It is as if art really has no place in our technologized world.

What I have been describing here is a disaster, a social one. Right at the time when technological "progress" has brought us new problems that we find especially baffling, like those of the environment and the redefinition of our most basic understandings of ourselves, it has, simultaneously, helped to cut off our access to one of the most potentially important means by which such problems can be considered, through art.[11]

Las Vegas, NV

NOTES

1. Foucault, M., Lecture (7th January 1976) Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977. Edited by Colin Gordon. Translated by Kate Soper. Pantheon, New York. 1980.

2. The most significant (and educationally relevant) recent treatment of the 'form of knowledge' thesis is that of Paul Hirst. See Hirst, P. H. Knowledge and the Curriculum, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1974. My 'Should Debbie Do Shale?: A Playful Polemic in Honor of Paul Feyerabend,' Educational Studies, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1982, treats Hirst's thesis from a point of view similar to the one taken here.

3. Popper, K. R., The Logic of Scientific Discovery. Hutchinson, London, 1968.

4. Kuhn, T. S., The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (2nd Edition). The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970.

5. Feyerabend, P. K. Against Method. New Left Books, London, 1975.

6. The literature which gives rie to this criticism is now very considerable. Three good introductions to it are:

   Brown, H. I., Perception, Theory and Commitment: The New Philosophy of Science. Precedent, CHicago, 1977.

   Chalmers, A. F. What is this thing called science? (2nd Edition). University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Queensland, 1982.

   Hacking, I. Representing and Intervening. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983.

7. Clark, K. Civilization. Harper and Row, London, 1969. P. 1.

8. Lasch, C. The Culture of Narcissism. Norton, New York, 1979, and The Minimal Self. Norton, New York, 1984, especially Ch. 4.

9. Steiner, G. The Death of Tragedy. Knopf, New York, 1961.

10. I owe this way of formulating the matter, and a good deal besides, to discussions with Patricia Amburgy.

11. A useful extension of parts of this argument is offered by John Gardiner in his On Moral Fiction. Basic Books, New York, 1978. Gardiner and I are in fundamental agreement about many matters, but also disagree about many.